DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 456 291 CE 082 271

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TITLE Increasing Opportunities for Apprenticeships and Traineeships in Melbourne's Western Region.
PUB DATE 2001-03-00
NOTE 12p.; In: Research to Reality: Putting VET Research To Work. Proceedings of the Australian Vocational Education and Training Research Association (AVETRA) Conference (4th, Adelaide, Australia, March 28-30, 2001); see CE 082 232.
AVAILABLE FROM For full text: http://www.avetra.org.au/PAPERS%202001/Martino%20Holden%20Demediuk.pdf.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Apprenticeships; Career Choice; Career Development; Career Education; *Cooperative Education; Developed Nations; *Education Work Relationship; *Educational Attitudes; Enrollment; Focus Groups; Foreign Countries; High Schools; Job Skills; Job Training; Occupational Information; Parent Attitudes; Program Improvement; Student Attitudes; *Student Recruitment; Teacher Attitudes; Vocational Education; *Work Experience Programs
IDENTIFIERS *Australia (Melbourne)

ABSTRACT

A research study was conducted to identify barriers to enrollment in and expansion of apprenticeships and traineeships in the western region of Melbourne, Australia. Data were collected through conducting six focus groups (a total of 180 tenth- and twelfth-grade students) from six schools in three Local Government Areas; surveying 400 local businesses; and interviewing key stakeholders such as group training companies, industry training boards, employers, and school career education teachers. The barriers identified included career counseling; the importance of vocational and technical education (VET) in schools; community and media perceptions quality and source of information; and organizational issues. The research resulted in recommendations--for schools, employers, and government--to provide a way for all parties to improve the quality of apprenticeship and traineeship opportunities and outcomes. Among the recommendations were these: (1) a pathways planning model should be developed; (2) a more effective media and information campaign that targets employers, including nontraditional sites for apprentices, should be developed; (3) the state government should implement the findings of the Kirby Report on postcompulsory education in Victoria. (KC)

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Increasing opportunities for apprenticeships and traineeships in Melbourne's western region

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Apprenticeships and traineeships or the rebadged New Apprenticeships have taken the initiative of encouraging, particularly young people, to look at career paths in a variety of traditional and non-traditional industries. In some regions of Australia, such as the west of Melbourne, this initiative appears to have failed.

The research project identified factors that inhibited the expansion of apprenticeships and traineeships in Melbourne's west. These factors include career counselling, the importance of VET in Schools, community and media perceptions, quality and source of information and organisational issues. The methodology involved conducting focus groups with six schools in three Local Government Areas, surveying 400 local businesses and interviewing key stakeholders such as Group Training Companies, Industry Training Boards, employers and school careers teachers.

The outcomes have provided an invaluable insight into the perceptions held by young people, businesses and educational authorities about the utility of New Apprenticeships. This research has taken a critical look at New Apprenticeships with the view to providing a way forward for all parties to improve the quality of apprenticeship and traineeship opportunities and outcomes.

This research project was the first of its kind focused on the western region of Melbourne, which set out to identify the barriers to the uptake of apprenticeships and traineeships.

In doing so, it took a snapshot of current New Apprenticeship[1] activity in the western region and analysed the realities of the attitudes and practices of key players. It gives an understanding of why there are barriers to the uptake of New Apprenticeships and highlights opportunities to improve New Apprenticeship outcomes in the western region.

The report identified fifteen recommendations grouped under the headings of schools, employers and government. The recommendations covered a range of areas, from lifelong learning for young people, developing a pathways planning model for career development, to the expansion of support provided by New Apprenticeship Centres (NACs). The recommendations also called upon the government to implement the findings of the Kirby Review (2000) to assist in the creation of greater opportunities for young people. Despite having a regional focus, the research team believed the outcomes of the research project had a broader context in similar regions around the nation.

This paper gives a brief overview of the research project, conducted by a team of researchers from Victoria University. Although the project had as its central objective the identification of barriers to the take-up of apprenticeships/traineeships by young

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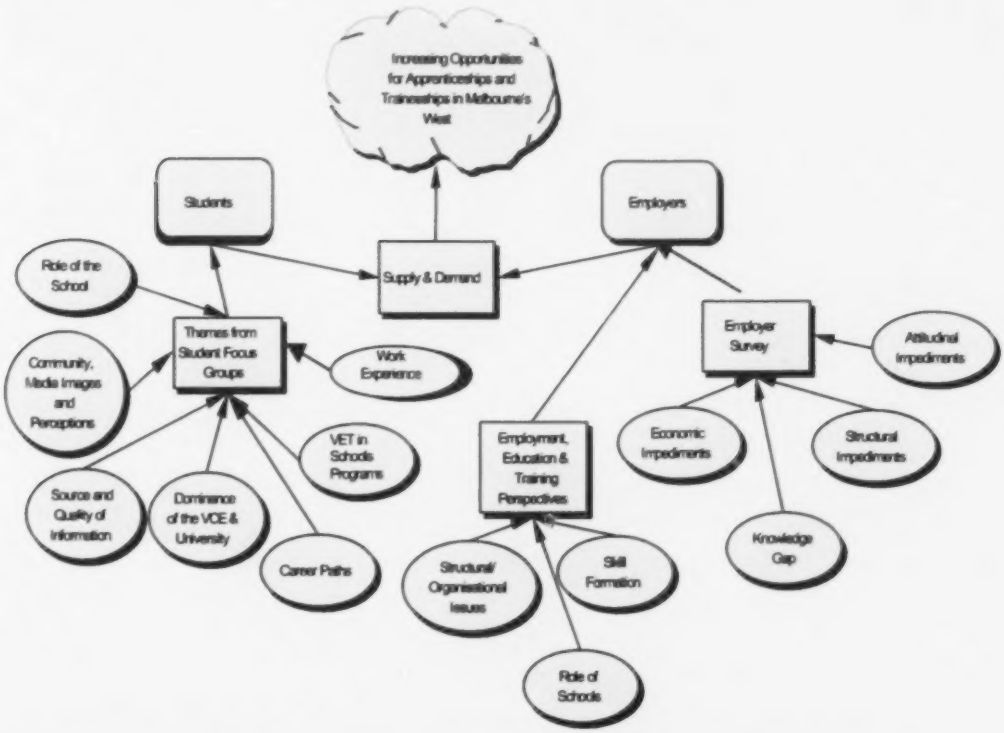
people in the western region of Melbourne, it identified further issues outside the parameters of the current project and provided a framework for further research in this area. The research project utilised a combination of qualitative (focus groups and interviews) methods and quantitative (surveys) methods to identify the barriers inhibiting the widespread involvement of young people in the New Apprenticeships program. In order to identify these barriers, the research team interviewed or surveyed students, teachers, employers and representatives of organisations responsible for training delivery or coordination of employment of apprentices and trainees or representatives advising government agencies re specific industry training needs throughout the western region. In doing so, a number of key themes and patterns began to emerge that assisted the research team to understand the complex interrelationships underpinning the development of skill formation in youth, and to identify some of the factors undermining this process.

Figure 1 illustrates the complex set of issues and themes raised by each of the groups involved in the project.

Figure 1: Key themes from the research



Following is a brief description of the western region of Melbourne and a summary of the analysis of the research outcomes clustered under three groupings: students; employers and employment; and education and training representatives.

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The research highlighted a series of what can be called 'supply and demand barriers', which the research team argued were sufficient to have a significant effect upon the overall acceptance of, and participation in, the apprenticeship/traineeship system by young people in the west of Melbourne.

The western region of Melbourne

Melbourne's western region, with a population of over half a million people, is one of Australia's fastest growing economic regions. In 1996, the region provided 140,807 jobs. However, 75% of the 207,722 residents with jobs were employed outside of the region.

Manufacturing is the staple industry in the western region of Melbourne[2]. There are only 1,825 manufacturing businesses in the region, placing it behind retail (4,737), property and business services (3,887) and construction (2,459) in the total number of businesses for an industry sector. It is, however, the largest employer in the region.

Combined, the key industry sectors in the west have a direct bearing on the potential growth of employment in the region, if transport, warehousing and logistics businesses are included. If manufacturing is the 'staple', transport and logistics are the 'meaty' area of new growth. The number of transport-specific companies located in the region is 1,301 and growing[3]. With the completion of the Western Ring Road and the impending completion of City Link[4], there is a noticeable increase in the number of transport and transport-related businesses moving into the region (eg tyre and equipment suppliers, cold storage, refrigeration, packaging and processing, freight management, heavy vehicle mechanics and calibration mechanics).

However, the take-up of apprenticeships and traineeships (in traditional and emerging industries) both in the manufacturing, transport and logistics sectors of the region is significantly low. A regional strategy developed by the National Institute of Economic and Industry Research (NIEIR) and Ratio Consultants forecasts that in the next 15 years, the rate of population growth in the west of Melbourne will exceed the rate of job growth by a factor of 5 to 1 (Ratio Consultants 1995).

This forecast highlights that a significant effort must be made to provide the regional community with the best possible 'platform' to utilise training and learning opportunities, including VET in Schools programs and apprenticeships and traineeships.

Students

The research team selected three groups of students from six Victorian secondary schools to be interviewed in separate focus groups (180 students). The schools were located within three local government areas representing small, medium and large take-up by young people of apprenticeships. The research group selected two schools per municipality: one government and one non-government. In each school, the careers teacher was asked to assist in the selection of students using the following criteria:

- year 12 students – students who had chosen traditional academic subjects
- year 12 students (VET stream) – an equal number of students who had chosen VET subjects
- year 10 students – equal numbers of males and females. The team was interested in the group's understanding of VET and the labour market before they had made subject selections.

The groups worked through a number of questions designed to highlight their understanding of apprenticeships and traineeships, the reasons behind specific subject and course decisions and future ambitions.

Students in both government and non-government[5] schools identified the pivotal role of the school in the process of choosing particular subjects and charting a post-school destination. In particular, students in both government and non-government schools highlighted the importance - and in many ways - the dominance of academic studies within the Victorian Certificate of Education (VCE). University (higher education) is perceived as the desirable outcome of the senior years of secondary schooling. This rather narrow and traditional 'academic' view of the purpose of secondary schooling and anticipated post-school pathways represents what the research team described as a specific type of 'school culture'.

For the purpose of this project, the research team identified 'school culture' as the implicit and explicit assumptions about what is worthwhile aspiring to and what should be the end goal of an individual's school education. An example of how school culture can influence career choice includes the extent to which a school seeks to actively promote as many post-school destinations as possible, or whether a limited range of options is promoted.

Where school culture is focused on narrow and academic objectives, there is a 'folding in' of the options available to young people. This 'folding in' of the options canvassed by students is also being reinforced by familial pressure to do well in VCE and gain a high ENTER (Equivalent National Tertiary Entrance Rank) score and a higher education place, rather than to consider apprenticeships and traineeships as a viable alternative. As a consequence, apprenticeships and traineeships were not seen as a first option in the post-school period. A view emerged in our discussions with students about attendance at university as the most desirable end product of a secondary education, regardless of the school, system or level.

As the following response illustrates, some students cannot conceive of the place an apprenticeship might hold in their life or where it might lead them.

> Girl 1: I was thinking about doing that, but I just couldn't drop everything and just do that for months. Like it is good to get paid for learning and stuff but I couldn't just drop everything. (School F – 15)

From the student responses, an apprenticeship was seen as a short-term experience and not as a career option. This type of response could also be interpreted as indicating that in the minds of some young people an apprenticeship is perceived as being part of a rigid and highly complex system, which leads to an uncertain future.

> Girl 3: Like an apprenticeship will go one, two years, what happens after that? Are we back where we started from, and like if you don't like it, could you transfer, or change what you wanted to do without too many hassles?
> (School F – 15)

The possibility of an apprenticeship offering a desirable post-school destination comparable to the high status of a higher education course, or being a better option than the low skill/low paid work they had already experienced, was not a consideration - it was something they might fall back on if all else failed.

In some schools there appeared to be a concerted effort to educate students about their post-school options, both academic and vocational. In other schools, a degree of confusion or the lack of a realistic understanding of the complex processes underpinning the transition from school to work was evident. For example, as late as year 11, some students were still unsure about what career paths were available to them and what type of post-school destination might best suit them. This degree of uncertainty reflected the existence of a significant mismatch between when and how students were exposed to career information and advice. The origin and quality of information loomed large as an issue in the comments made by students. Ad hoc and informal sources of information appear to play as important a part in career choice as the formal structures and processes associated with school-based careers counselling.

Students highlighted the pivotal role they perceived careers teachers played in the process of selecting VCE subjects and post-school destinations. This appeared to indicate that when careers counselling by teachers is done effectively, students feel well placed to make realistic career choices. Students spoke highly of school-organised work experience programs as a worthwhile source of practical information about potential careers.

On the other hand, when asked to comment on the delivery of VET in Schools programs, some students were critical of the manner in which their individual schools managed this. They specifically referred to examples of poor delivery and the inadequate provision of staffing, resources and information. Students were highly critical of the knowledge base of teachers delivering VET in School subjects, and in particular, felt this did not adequately prepare them for a vocational pathway.

Students discussed their views on community and media images and perceptions of apprenticeships/traineeships. Some students felt under pressure from community and family expectations to succeed in school. Students from non-government schools spoke about pressure being exerted from home to do well in year 12 and to undertake a university course. On the other hand, government school students did not appear to be under the same kinds of pressures and exhibited a disenchantment and lack of engagement to schooling in general and, in particular, post-school destinations.

An unexpected issue which emerged from this research project was the apparent negative impact on students of the State Government-sponsored WorkCover television advertisements. The television advertisements featured a series of vignettes focusing on how unsafe work practices can lead to accidents. At least two of the advertisements depicted young apprentices as the victims of either poor

workplace practices or bastardisation by coworkers. Conversely, students identified the army's 'The Edge' campaign as painting a positive and even exciting image of what constitutes an apprenticeship or a technical job in the armed forces. It should be noted that both advertisements did have quite distinct target groups. WorkCover had been targeting employers in an effort to raise awareness about the dangers of an unsafe work environment, and the armed forces were targeting young people in a recruitment drive.

Employers

The research team selected a random sample of employers to survey from the database of Western Melbourne Region Economic Development Organisation (WREDO). WREDO is the peak business and local government forum in the western suburbs of Melbourne.

The survey identified a series of structural and economic impediments to the taking on of young people through the New Apprenticeship scheme. The largest industry sectors in the western region - such as building and construction, manufacturing, wholesale/retail and transport and storage - account for the majority of the apprentices and trainees reported in the survey. The survey also found that non-traditional sites of engagement of apprentices and trainees, such as information technology and finance, property and business services, are opening up to apprentices and trainees.

Responses to the survey identified that the process of taking on apprentices combined a formal recruitment (57%) and informal family/community recruitment (43%). The use of informal processes to recruit apprentices is an area that needs to be more closely examined. It is quite possible that large numbers of potential apprentices and trainees are dissuaded from contemplating apprenticeships and traineeships as a pathway because of their lack of connections or access to informal patterns of recruitment.

Employers are unwilling to commit themselves to doing more than maintaining current levels of employment of apprentices in the medium term. One interpretation of the hesitancy to employ apprentices could be due to a number of factors, including uncertainty about the continuation of current high levels of economic growth and uncertainty surrounding the introduction of the Goods and Services Tax (GST). Whilst employers did not specifically mention this, the research team suggests that it is unlikely that levels of employment within their firms would be quarantined from any negative impact the new arrangements might have for their firms.

Seventy-five percent of employers reported that the traditional form of work experience was the primary means of providing students with a 'window' to the world of work. The under-utilisation of structured workplace learning by employers, as highlighted in the survey responses, is a matter for concern and warrants further examination. There appears to be a confusion and lack of understanding amongst employers regarding the difference between work experience and structured workplace learning.

Taking all of the factors into consideration, it is interesting to note that employers listed the growth of their firm (36%), or the size of their firm (27%) as being factors that would either encourage or discourage them from taking on apprentices. The relationship between sustainable economic growth and the potential for, and willingness to, engage higher levels of apprentices was a significant theme to emerge from the analysis of the employer survey responses.

Employers reported that they were concerned with the standard of training of apprentices (41%). Schofield (2000b) recorded similar concerns from employers about the quality and standard of the preparation of apprentices in her report on Victorian apprenticeship arrangements.

Employers identified Registered Training Organisations (RTOs) and the local Training and Further Education (TAFE) institution as the primary source of information on apprenticeships. This could largely be explained by the established relationship employers may have with their local RTO/TAFE in traditional apprenticeship industry sectors. This raises a number of issues around the efficacy of the national advertising campaign run by the Department of Education, Training and Youth Affairs (DETYA). It also highlights the role of New Apprenticeship Centres (NACs) in getting the message out to employers about the new arrangements, including the expanded range of New Apprenticeships available. Improving information flows about the benefits to employers of the program is clearly an area for more concentrated effort by the Australian National Training Authority (ANTA), DETYA and the Victorian State Training Authority - the Office of Post Compulsory Education Training and Employment (PETE).

The proportion of employers reporting that they understood the concept of an apprenticeship and traineeship (40%) was consistent with the proportion of employers who reported that they did not or disagreed (47%). This breakdown was mirrored in the answers received to questions on the clarity of the information on apprenticeships and traineeships, and incentives to business. This could have been caused by the use of the term apprenticeship and traineeship rather than 'New Apprenticeship', and reflects a level of confusion about the differences between traditional and historic notions of an apprenticeship and the newly re-badged New Apprenticeship scheme.

The majority of employers did not have a strong view on the concept of part-time apprentices or trainees. In fact, 46% responded that they did not know whether year 11 and 12 students made successful part-time apprentices or trainees. This lack of understanding, or perhaps lack of awareness of the opportunity to engage part-time apprentices who continue with their studies at VCE whilst undertaking an apprenticeship, indicates that there is some type of information blockage. Any form of information blockage means that the full range of options available under the umbrella of apprenticeships and traineeships is not reaching a crucial audience for this program - the employer.

Conversely, when asked to give an opinion on the long-standing and widely practiced school-organised work experience program, employers responded overwhelmingly that this played a positive factor in the process they used to recruit new staff. 'On-the-job' and 'off-the-job' methods of training were highly valued by employers as part of the process of developing the skills of an apprentice or trainee.

When asked to indicate a view on the adequacy of information provided by external agencies and organisations charged with the responsibility for disseminating information on apprenticeships and traineeships, more employers expressed a view that they did not know (35%), or disagreed (19%) than agreed (32%). The high level of the 'do not know' category may be interpreted as an indication that information flows are not generating the positive effects upon the employers they are designed for.

Whilst a significant proportion (41%) of the respondents to the survey indicated that they agreed with the proposition that apprenticeships and traineeships are meeting the needs of employers, a significant percentage of respondents chose to answer that they did not know.

This response by employers reflects a lack of real understanding amongst a number of employers of the utility of apprenticeships and traineeships. Simply put, a number of employers are hesitant to commit or even comment about apprenticeships and traineeships. The reasons for this can only be hypothesised, but it could be inferred from the results of the survey that the employer responses at least reflect ambivalence towards the issue of taking on apprentices or trainees. The responses to some of the questions seem to reflect the possibility that employers lack useful information about the utility of the New Apprenticeship scheme for their specific firm or organisation. A reason for this ambivalence might be the impact of technological change and the continued increase in productivity and the concomitant downsizing of the labour force in many sectors of the economy. For many firms, productivity might be rising, whilst at the same time their need for skilled workers is declining. It would follow then from a practical standpoint that the only reason some firms would take on apprentices or trainees would be as an act of altruism[6] rather than as part of a human resource strategy.

Employment, education and training perspectives

The final group of subjects interviewed by the research team included a number of employers and representatives of Industry Training Boards (ITBs) as well as stakeholders from within the education system, such as careers counsellors and individuals with responsibility for co-ordinating part-time apprenticeship programs for secondary school students. In the course of these interviews, a number of significant structural and organisational issues concerning the coordination of the New Apprenticeship scheme emerged. In particular, the manner in which information about the program is presented both to employers and to young people needs to be addressed. The coordination and management of the New Apprenticeship scheme was also raised in the interviews as an area which needs to be revamped if it is to become more attractive to employers.

Issues relating to skill formation also emerged, particularly the manner in which for some industry sectors, the national training agenda is at odds with industry goals. Employers are able to increase productivity and at the same time upskill their workforce without taking on workers or apprentices. The segmentation of work into specialised traineeships, which had been traditionally the domain of an apprenticeship, was seen as detracting from the appeal of New Apprenticeships both

for employers and for young people. The representatives of the ITBs highlighted the consequences for the economy of an ageing workforce and short-term planning mentality of some employers. In time, the neglect of skill formation could lead to a shortage of skilled workers. Employers will have to be convinced that increasing productivity as a consequence of upskilling their existing workforce and technological innovation can only be effective as short-term solutions. The ageing population will mean that succession planning needs to be addressed by firms if they are to maintain their viability.

This group identified the important role schools play in the transition from school to work, and the significance of careers counselling in this process. Some participants also raised the question of the point at which students are exposed to vocational education. In particular, some of the ITB spokespeople were unhappy with the emphasis some schools were placing on VET in Schools programs as an introduction to a vocational education pathway. The dominance of the VCE and the goal of a high ENTER score as the only desirable outcome for schools was also questioned.

The relationship between VET in Schools programs, part-time apprenticeships and the New Apprenticeship scheme (in general) needs to be carefully examined in order to make the transition from school to work as seamless as possible. The current situation seems to be creating a mismatch between the goals and aspirations of young people and schools and the way in which New Apprenticeships are promoted to school students by ITBs and other agencies. There needs to be some overall plan or agreement to regulate and help direct young people into a number of pathways which can lead on to either work, further study or vocational education and training.

Some recommendations

The research team identified a number of recommendations in the report, clustered under the headings of schools, employers and government.

The following is a sample of the recommendations:

Schools

A pathways planning model should be developed and piloted. This would incorporate the development of a Pathways Portfolio in years 9-10, which would be added to over the subsequent years.

Employers

A more effective media and information campaign needs to be developed which targets employers and informs them of the support available through the New Apprenticeship scheme. Non-traditional sites of employment for apprentices, such as information technology and the service sector, should be encouraged to examine the benefits of the
New Apprenticeship scheme.

Government

The state government should implement the findings of the Kirby Review on post-compulsory education and training in Victoria, which would assist in the creation of greater opportunities for young people to engage in New Apprenticeships.

Notes

1. For the purpose of this paper, the terms apprenticeship and traineeship will be used to refer to the Commonwealth New Apprenticeships program.

2. Statistical details are based upon the 1997 Australian Bureau of Statistics Business Register Count.

3. ibid.

4. City Link is a privately-funded electronic tollroad linking three of Melbourne's freeways, creating routes between Melbourne Airport, the port and industrial centres.

5. To represent the non-government sector the team chose to examine Catholic systemic schools, as it was felt that the Catholic system was comparable in size and approach to government schools. The Catholic system is attempting to chart a coherent approach to the provision of VET. The team selected three government co-educational schools and three Catholic systemic schools (one all-boy, one all-girl, and one coeducational school). In each of the schools, students in year 10, year 11 and year 12 were interviewed.

6. A report prepared by the Western Australian Government entitled 'New apprenticeships: making it work' (Western Australian Department of Training 1998, pg 47), describes the factors that motivate employers to take apprentices and trainees as being a mix of 'altruistic' and 'business' motives.

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